

John 3:16 – The Greatest Verse

John 3:16

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John, obviously to any reader, was led by God to spend a great amount of his writing on the concept of eternal life. From Jn. 2:23 through 17:26 he records for us the ministry of the Son of God and the topic of his imparting eternal life and describes what it is and what it does.

‘Many people saw the miraculous signs He was doing and trusted in His name’ (Jn. 2:23).

In His interview with Nicodemus, a rigid moralist and a Sanhedrin member,

1. In v1, Jesus showed the necessity of regeneration, ‘You *must* be born again,’
2. In v7, and the necessity of His death to accomplish a basis for this spiritual transaction, ‘so the Son of Man *must* be lifted up,’
3. Then in v14, in a most solemn fashion (‘I tell you the truth,’ vv3, 5) Jesus declared that no one can ‘see,’ (v3), or enter, the kingdom of God unless he is ‘born of water’ (figure of the cleansing Word, Eph 5:26; Jas 1:18; 1 Pet 1:23); and of the Spirit (the Holy Spirit, the Agent in regeneration), v5.

This is a supernatural imparting of eternal life on the basis of Christ’s death, typified by the Mosaic serpent in the wilderness, 14 (see Num 21:5–20; 2 Cor 5:21). The theme of John’s gospel is clearly displayed in one of the most famous verses in all of the Bible - verse 16.

¹⁶For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Just by way of a beginning to our thinking on this wonderful verse we can say by way of a summary that this single verse is actually a fabulous summary in and of itself of the gospel, and really of the entire Bible.

The very first word we see is “**For**” and it connects v. 16 to v. 15 and explains what happened to make it possible that someone can “have eternal life” (v. 15), that is, through believing in Christ.

And so, “For” or because “**God so loved the world**” which is an astounding statement in that context because the OT and other Jewish writings had spoken only of God’s love for his people Israel. God’s love for “the world” made it possible for “whosoever” (v. 15) believes in Christ, not Jews alone, to have eternal life.

It also becomes clear that God’s love for the world was not mere sentiment but led to a specific action: that is, that He **gave his only (or only-begotten Son** depending on your translation), which John elsewhere explains as sending him

to earth as a man (v. 17) to suffer and die and thereby to bear the penalty for sins (see verse 1 John 2:2; cf. Rom. 3:25).

Regarding his statement “only Son,” we could look at John 1:14 which contains the same Greek phrase, but will not take the time to do so. The purpose of giving his Son was to make God’s great gift of eternal life available to anyone, namely, to **whoever believes in him**, that is, whoever personally trusts in him (note 11:25).

The purpose for this is that those who believe will “**Not perish**”, meaning to not perish in eternal judgment, which is placed in contrast to having **eternal life**, that is, the life of abundant joy and immeasurable blessing in the presence of God forever. Those who “believe in” Christ **have** that “eternal life” and already experience its blessings in this present time, not yet fully, but in some significant measure.

It will be profitable for us to think through this precious verse a step by step at a time, perhaps looking at this, perhaps the greatest verse in the NT, if not the entire Bible, via a handy outline I came across via some friends and some reading I have done recently:

First, the verse point to the source of this salvation:

1. The Great God ----- “God”

The Greek word for God - “Theos” is just that, speaking of the general concept of the Creator God Who is He Who has created and Who controls all things. It is used in the NT to speak of He, Who, in the OT was referred to in quite a number of different terms, from Yahweh, to Elohim, to Jehovah and a significant number of combinations of those words.

However, the use of this Name, “Theos”, carries with it, no less dignity or impact when and where it is use. Here, in the context in which it is used, it is pointing toward the Greatness of this God Who has made provision for the salvation of all men. He is a great and marvelous God Who can and did do all necessary for the purpose in view.

It is important, in order to really understand what John is saying here, that we keep firmly in mind that we are NOT just talking about so “old man upstairs” kind of God but the supreme and authoritative Being that there is Who, because of His own will and desire, made provision such that “whosoever will may come” and say to it that His own nature (speaking of His justice and holy wrath for sin and other like things), that His Own Nature could be satisfied and not violated or set aside. This was a significant part of the purpose for which the Lord Jesus came. We can see this in the very next part of this wonderful verse where we read that He had, for His creation:

2. A Great Love ----- “So Loved”

“So loved...” is a combination or two great words. First, of course, is the verb “loved”. It is presented to is in what is called the “aorist” tense which

pictures the action of the verb as what could be called a “snapshot” event in which the action the action in a simple and summary fashion without any real concern for the portrayal of the process of the verb. Likewise, contributing to our understanding here, it is in what is called the “indicative mood”. The indication shows us something that is actual and as something real, not possible coming later. God’s love was something that was real and was what prompted Him (not to mention the Lord Jesus) to take the action in view. It is clear, also, that it was not something that men had to “plug into” so to speak to make that love an active thing. It was present, the Word of God says, from long before time came to be. God “loved us” from eternity past! That love was present before Adam and Eve, not to mention all the rest of humanity that has come to be since, were creation, and before you and I were even conceived in the womb! And so John says that “God so loved...”;

3. The Great Company ----- The World

This is what is meant when John speaks of God loving “the world”. It can only be the wildest conjecture to try and come up with what the total number of people has been since Adam and Eve. But John’s point, in telling us that God’s love was for “the World” is precisely to help us to see the broad, the magnificent, the immense scope of God’s great love. We tend to think of love in terms of something that has a scope and a set of boundaries. this is because we tend to think of it in human terms, a perfectly natural and human way to think of it. God didn’t set about doing “one thing at a time” as is common in human beings who do even grand things! God, in eternity past, as a part of His eternal character, loved the entire world, all men who would ever be, an active thing that set Him about pursuing what was necessary to accomplish a result consistent with that love.

To set up John’s speaking of the great gift coming in a moment, we mention...

4. The Great Freeness ----- that He Gave

We just want to note that John wants his readers to understand that this giving of such a gift is a gift given freely. God does not ask certain things, thoughts, or return gifts. There is no requirement asked to balance this wonderful gift given. In fact, there is nothing in the human realm that COULD balance or equalize the gift that John speaks of.

What was necessary was his giving...

5. The Great Gift ----- His Only Begotten Son

We can all understand what is meant by “only Begotten”. In fact, we ought to note that the entire phrase “...only Begotten Son” is quite significant. “Only Begotten” is actual a translation of a single Greek word - “monogenēs” from two more simple Greek words, “mono” referring to a thing that is singular or unique and genes which, in turn, comes from “ginomai” meaning “to come to be” or “to become”. We can conclude that the Son of God did NOT come to be

in what could be considered the NORMAL fashion in which a son would “come to be”.

The implication is contained within the verse itself where it pretty clearly says that God Himself (and God alone) is the One Who was responsible for the “only begotten Son” coming to be. Surely, He used the womb of the Virgin Mary, but there is not so much as even a hint that an egg from Mary was a part of the process. We must remember that BOTH Adam and Eve were condemned by God for their sin in Eden. They BOTH bore the stain of the curse of God, they were stained by that curse and bore the sin that was a part of that sin. We do not have the time to discuss more fully this idea, and so simply say it is so and leave it to another time to demonstrate it Biblically. Jesus Christ was God’s “Only Begotten Son”. His humanity was entirely because that was a part of God’s precious gift that would bring the work of Redemption to:

6. The Great Invitation ----- Whosoever Believeth

This is what we might call the “Greatest Invitation”. Salvation, rooted and founded in the work of the Lord Jesus, is available to “Whosoever Believes”! There are many who play games with just who it is that are part of this believing group.

- Are they those who God chose in the past and are the ONLY ones for whom Salvation is available?
- Or, as quite a number of others believe, the matter depends ENTIRELY on the choice of the human heart with God playing not part in the choosing?
- Or, as many historical figures have taught, is it really a combination of the two with God playing a determinative part, electing and then drawing men (not to mention women) and then humans needing to hear the Gospel and make the choice to bring the redemptive matter to a positive close?

I feel more positive about the third choice. Surely the Bible makes it clear that we are, indeed “elect ” according to the foreknowledge of God”. (1 Peter 1:2)

² elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace be multiplied.

God’s foreknowledge dates “from before the foundation” meaning the creation of, or even being in the eternal mind of God. John himself says the same thing over in John 17:24:

*²⁴ “Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; **for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.**”*

I am not at all certain that God just thrusts “salvation” on people apart from any participation on their part. This dear verse underscores this idea pretty clearly: “*For God so loved the world, that WHOSOEVER BELIEVES on Him...*”. This is NOT to say that the election and drawing of God do not play what is likely even the greatest part in when you and I became believers. BUT, we did NEED to believe, to exercise our choice and submit ourselves to the truth and submit to God. God’s electing choice in eternity past and our own personal choice are both a part (along with a number of other Biblical truths) of the redemptive process.

This Redemption that is a result of what we are speaking of results in a grand and glorious...

7. The Great Deliverance - Should Not Perish

We’ve mentioned already that sin rightly and justly deserves punishment and one day God will require such an accounting from all men who have not, by means of the very thing we are discussing here, will be required to give account themselves. We’ll not take time to discuss the horror of the judgment that will fall on those who choose to account for their sin and offense to God.

The point here, portrayed in this verse, is that God’s “Only Begotten Son” the Lord Jesus Christ came to do a number of things, the greatest of which, is to deliver men from the terrible penalty their sin will demand of them in that final day. John calls that “perishing”. The Greek word is “*apōlētai*” which comes from a verb that means “to be utterly destroyed”. This form of the verb speaks of what we can call “spiritual death”. It is in a form that passes what determines to action of the verb to something outside of itself. The idea is that this “spiritual death” is occurring by a cause outside of the One inflicting it. The one dying is not to be thought of as “spiritually killing themselves”, but rather, it is the Judge of all men Who will call them to answer for their rebellion and wickedness.

Sin must be punished because it can be defined as the “violation of the Law”. The Scripture tells us this needful judgment is destined for a coming day. But in a different verse, it goes on and says that this coming terrible judgment will be borne for the “world” by One “Whom He has ordained...”.

³¹ because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31)

The penalty for sin is a true horror; but the gift that John says is offered to “whosoever” in virtually more marvelous than can be totally understood, that is, in any more than concept!

The verse also sets something against this great penalty that Jesus bore on Calvary’s cross. There is also...

8. *The Great Inheritance - Everlasting Life*

*¹⁶ For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him **should not perish but have everlasting life.***

Just to note an obvious thing, this last phrase begins with the conjunction “but”, a marker of contrast that sets the previous idea over and against the end of the verse here. It is especially interesting that this is pretty much a repeat of the end of verse 15:

*¹⁵ that whoever believes in Him **should not perish but have eternal life.***

Taken together and recognizing the repetitive nature of the two, we can see that they are both, with slight difference giving an answer to verse 14:

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, (John 3:14)

John makes the clear parallel between that matter of the raising of the serpent in the wilderness and the sacrifice of His Only Begotten Son by our Heavenly Father. The result, John says, is whoever “believes on Him should not perish but have eternal life”! This is said twice in both verse 15 and 16.

The very end of verse 16 is that, because of the sacrifice, if it is received, the “inheritance” given is called “everlasting life”. This is the categoric opposite of the penalty, that is, spiritual death as we mentioned earlier. The word for everlasting is a translation of the Greek word for eternity - “aiōniōs”. It modifies (as an adjective) the word for life or living. Whereas the one coming under judgment will suffer spiritual death, death forever. The one who “believes on Him” will walk in “eternal life”.

Just as a last note, we should clearly see that the idea of “eternal life” speaks of a quality that the believe “has” or possesses; NOT one that is awarded to him later, OR one that he somehow earns. From the moment that he “believes on Him” he “has everlasting life”. The inheritance does not speak of quality of life or of the things or conditions enjoyed there. There are many, many other passages in God’s Word that tells us a great deal about what Heaven, Eternal Life will be like and what we will enjoy one that great time begins.

John’s intent is to direct us to the great joy that will be the part of the one who “believes on Him” and receives this wonderful inheritance. That joy will begin when one receives it and come to fullness once he/she enters that life after death. We truly have a great inheritance!

Just to note, there is also the implication that the one who, instead, enter judgment will experience the very opposite. That is absolutely a horror to think of, even as redeemed people. Whether the one contemplating the truth of what is coming to the unredeemed as their own fate, or as the fate of other men (family, friends, or others). It is this that God can use to motivate His children to sharing the Gospel with those around them.